

Bob Ewell Threatens Atticus and his Children

“I wish Bob Ewell wouldn’t chew tobacco,” was all Atticus said about it.

According to Miss Stephanie Crawford, however, Atticus was leaving the post office when Mr. Ewell approached him, cursed him, spat on him, and threatened to kill him. Miss Stephanie (who, by the time she had told it twice was there and had seen it all—passing by from the Jitney Jungle, she was)—Miss Stephanie said Atticus didn’t bat an eye, just took out his handkerchief and wiped his face and stood there and let Mr. Ewell call him names wild horses could not bring her to repeat. Mr. Ewell was a veteran of an obscure war; that plus Atticus’s peaceful reaction probably prompted him to inquire, “Too proud to fight, you nigger-lovin’ bastard?” Miss Stephanie said Atticus said, “No, too old,” put his hands in his pockets and strolled on. Miss Stephanie said you had to hand it to Atticus Finch, he could be right dry sometimes.

Jem and I didn’t think it entertaining.

“After all, though,” I said, “he was the deadliest shot in the county one time. He could—”

“You know he wouldn’t carry a gun, Scout. He ain’t even got one—” said Jem.

“You know he didn’t even have one down at the jail that night. He told me havin’ a gun around’s an invitation to somebody to shoot you.”

“This is different,” I said. “We can ask him to borrow one.”

We did, and he said, “Nonsense.”

Dill was of the opinion that an appeal to Atticus’s better nature might work: after all, we would starve if Mr. Ewell killed him, besides be raised exclusively by Aunt Alexandra, and we all knew the first thing she’d do before Atticus was under the ground good would be to fire Calpurnia. Jem said it might work if I cried and flung a fit, being young and a girl. That didn’t work either. But when he noticed us dragging around the neighborhood, not eating, taking little interest in our normal pursuits, Atticus discovered how deeply frightened we were. He tempted Jem with a new football magazine one night; when he saw Jem flip the pages and toss it aside, he said, “What’s bothering you, son?”

Jem came to the point: "Mr. Ewell."

"What has happened?"

"Nothing's happened. We're scared for you, and we think you oughta do something about him."

Atticus smiled wryly. "Do what? Put him under a peace bond?"

"When a man says he's gonna get you, looks like he means it."

"He meant it when he said it," said Atticus. "Jem, see if you can stand in Bob Ewell's shoes a minute. I destroyed his last shred of credibility at that trial, if he had any to begin with. The man had to have some kind of comeback, his kind always does. So if spitting in my face and threatening me saved Mayella Ewell one extra beating, that's something I'll gladly take. He had to take it out on somebody and I'd rather it be me than that houseful of children out there. You understand?"

Jem nodded.

Aunt Alexandra entered the room as Atticus was saying, "We don't have anything to fear from Bob Ewell, he got it all out of his system that morning."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that, Atticus," she said. "His kind'd do anything to pay off a grudge. You know how those people are."

"What on earth could Ewell do to me, sister?"

"Something furtive," Aunt Alexandra said. "You may count on that."

"Nobody has much chance to be furtive in Maycomb," Atticus answered.

.....

After that, we were not afraid. Summer was melting away, and we made the most of it. August was on the brink of September. Dill would be leaving for Meridian tomorrow; today he was off with Jem at Barker's Eddy. Jem had discovered with angry amazement that nobody had ever bothered to teach Dill how to swim, a skill Jem considered necessary as walking. They had spent two afternoons at the creek, they said they were going in naked and I couldn't come, so I divided the lonely hours between Calpurnia and Miss Maudie.

The front door slammed and I heard Atticus's footsteps in the hall. Automatically I wondered what time it was. Not nearly time for him to be home, and on Missionary Society days he usually stayed downtown until black dark. He stopped in the doorway. His hat was in his hand, and his face was white.

"Excuse me, ladies," he said. "Go right ahead with your meeting, don't let me disturb you. Alexandra, could you come to the kitchen a minute? I want to borrow Calpurnia for a while."

He didn't go through the dining room, but went down the back hallway and entered the kitchen from the rear door. Aunt Alexandra and I met him. The dining room door opened again and Miss Maudie joined us. Calpurnia had half risen from her chair.

"Cal," Atticus said, "I want you to go with me out to Helen Robinson's house—"

"What's the matter?" Aunt Alexandra asked, alarmed by the look on my father's face.

"Tom's dead."

Aunt Alexandra put her hands to her mouth.

"They shot him," said Atticus. "He was running. It was during their exercise period. They said he just broke into a blind raving charge at the fence and started climbing over. Right in front of them —"

"Didn't they try to stop him? Didn't they give him any warning?" Aunt Alexandra's voice shook.

"Oh yes, the guards called to him to stop. They fired a few shots in the air, then to kill. They got him just as he went over the fence. They said if he'd had two good arms he'd have made it, he was moving *that* fast. Seventeen bullet holes in him. They didn't have to shoot him that much. Cal, I want you to come out with me and help me tell Helen."

"Yes sir," she murmured, fumbling at her apron. Miss Maudie went to Calpurnia and untied it.

"This is the last straw, Atticus," Aunt Alexandra said.

“Depends on how you look at it,” he said. “What was one Negro, more or less, among two hundred of ‘em? He wasn’t *Tom* to them; he was an escaping prisoner.” Atticus leaned against the refrigerator, pushed up his glasses, and rubbed his eyes. “We had such a good chance,” he said. “I told him what I thought, but I couldn’t in truth say that we had more than a good chance. I guess Tom was tired of white men’s chances and preferred to take his own. Ready, Cal?”

“Yessir, Mr. Finch.”

“Then let’s go.”

Aunt Alexandra sat down in Calpurnia’s chair and put her hands to her face. She sat quite still; she was so quiet I wondered if she would faint. I heard Miss Maudie breathing as if she had just climbed the steps, and in the dining room the ladies chattered happily. I thought Aunt Alexandra was crying, but when she took her hands away from her face, she was not. She looked weary. She spoke, and her voice was flat.

“I can’t say I approve of everything he does, Maudie, but he’s my brother, and I just want to know when this will ever end.” Her voice rose: “It tears him to pieces. He doesn’t show it much, but it tears him to pieces. I’ve seen him when — what else do they want from him, Maudie, what else?”

“What does *who* want, Alexandra?” Miss Maudie asked.

“I mean this town. They’re perfectly willing to let him do what they’re too afraid to do themselves — it might lose ‘em a nickel. They’re perfectly willing to let him wreck his health doing what they’re afraid to do, they’re —”

“Be quiet, they’ll hear you,” said Miss Maudie. “Have you ever thought of it this way, Alexandra? Whether Maycomb knows it or not, we’re paying the highest tribute we can pay a man. We trust him to do right. It’s that simple.”

“Who?” Aunt Alexandra never knew she was echoing her twelve-year-old nephew.

“The handful of people in this town who say that fair play is not marked *White Only*; the handful of people who say a fair trial is for everybody, not just us; the handful of people with enough humility to think, when they look at a Negro, there but for the Lord’s kindness am I.” Miss Maudie’s old crispness was returning: “The handful of people in this town with background, that’s who they are.”

Tom had been given due process of law to the day of his death; he had been tried openly and convicted by twelve good men and true; my father had fought for him all the way. Then Mr. Underwood's meaning became clear: Atticus had used every tool available to free men to save Tom Robinson, but in the secret courts of men's hearts Atticus had no case. Tom was a dead man the minute Mayella Ewell opened her mouth and screamed.

The name *Ewell* gave me a queasy feeling. Maycomb had lost no time in getting Mr. Ewell's views on Tom's demise and passing them along through that English Channel of gossip, Miss Stephanie Crawford. Miss Stephanie told Aunt Alexandra in Jem's presence ("Oh foot, he's old enough to listen.") that Mr. Ewell said it made one down and about two more to go. Jem told me not to be afraid, Mr. Ewell was more hot gas than anything. Jem also told me that if I breathed a word to Atticus, if in any way I let Atticus know I knew, Jem would personally never speak to me again.

.....

School started, and so did our daily trips past the Radley Place. Jem was in the seventh grade and went to high school, beyond the grammar-school building; I was now in the third grade, and our routines were so different I only walked to school with Jem in the mornings and saw him at mealtimes. He went out for football, but was too slender and too young yet to do anything but carry the team water buckets. This he did with enthusiasm; most afternoons he was seldom home before dark.

The Radley Place had ceased to terrify me, but it was no less gloomy, no less chilly under its great oaks, and no less uninviting. Mr. Nathan Radley could still be seen on a clear day, walking to and from town; we knew Boo was there, for the same old reason—nobody'd seen him carried out yet.

I sometimes felt a twinge of remorse, when passing by the old place, at ever having taken part in what must have been sheer torment to Arthur Radley — what reasonable recluse wants children peeping through his shutters, delivering greetings on the end of a fishing pole, wandering in his collards at night? And yet I remembered. Two Indian-head pennies, chewing gum, soap dolls, a rusty medal, a broken watch and chain. Jem must have put them away somewhere. I stopped and

looked at the tree one afternoon: the trunk was swelling around its cement patch. The patch itself was turning yellow.

We had almost seen him a couple of times, a good enough score for anybody. But I still looked for him each time I went by. Maybe someday we would see him. I imagined how it would be: when it happened, he'd just be sitting in the swing when I came along. "Hidy do, Mr. Arthur," I would say, as if I had said it every afternoon of my life. "Evening, Jean Louise," he would say, as if he had said it every afternoon of my life, "right pretty spell we're having, isn't it?" "Yes sir, right pretty," I would say, and go on.

It was only a fantasy. We would never see him. He probably did go out when the moon was down and gaze upon Miss Stephanie Crawford. I'd have picked somebody else to look at, but that was his business. He would never gaze at us.

Thus began our longest journey together.